

Just as with any other theory in education, the concept of learning styles has come under fire from critics across disciplines due to the wide variance in tests available, the dramatically different results between testing instruments for learning styles, and more generally, because there is not always a lot of educational research to support initiatives aimed at changing teaching strategy. Therefore, almost as a disclaimer, it should be said that there is not uniform consensus on the general theory of learning styles as a whole, let alone visual learning styles. In other words, the biggest misconception about learning styles and yes, this includes the visual learning style, is that implementing suggestions about your learning style are a fail-proof recipe for success. Knowing your learning style can grant you tools and better self-knowledge, but it all comes down to practice.

Aside from the misconception about learning styles being a cure-all for bad grades or difficulty learning, one of the most common misconceptions about the visual learning style is that people who have this learning style can only learn if they have pictures, graphs, or other visual aides to help them understand the material. This is not at all the case since after all, this is a learning preference, not a learning requirement. The truth is, people with verbal or visual learning styles (and countless others) learn perfectly well without visual aides when necessary; the presence of the visual materials is not required, but it often does produce the best results.

Another common in a slew of misconceptions about the visual learning style is a misconception that also applies to the other learning preferences that are out there; that one learning style is somehow better than the other or is more predicting of someone's intelligence or capacity to learn. This is not at all the case. Just as some people write much better with their right versus left hand does not mean that they are somehow better or smarter. It's simply a preference, even if it is not one that was actively chosen. Someone may have a visual learning style or learning preference and will perform just as well as or better than someone else with a different learning style in the classroom or on tests, this is again, simply a matter of innate preference, not a fundamental indicator of intelligence.

One of the more subtle misconceptions about the visual learning style is that it takes breaking everything down into very simple, clear images in order for someone with a visual learning style to process the information. This is not at all the case; making it “simple” by using pictures is not the core idea. As researchers note, “The lack of relationship between spatial relations and visual learning style...suggests that the visual style involves more than simple operations upon simple images. In contrast to spatial relations, spatial visualization requires complex imaging (that is, of complex figures) and relatively complicated operations upon those images and is more a measure of power than speed” (Kirby & Moore, 1988).

Another of the common misconceptions about learning styles is that there are no patterns to who exhibits which learning preferences. Researchers are actually finding that there are strong ties, especially along the lines of gender. Men and women simply have distinct learning styles, although like any other broader classification that involves gender, there are always exceptions. When researchers have made broader generalizations about gender and learning styles, they have most often seen a marked inclination for males to be visual learners (see bibliography for numerous sources lending to these theories). As with any kind of research that is based on gender divisions, the findings should be taken with a small grain of salt; “gender ideology is disseminated through the representation of gender stereotypes in the mass media, through patriarchal structures of family, and religion, and through continued structuring of the workplace around gender inequality” (Alumran, 2008).

The issue of learning styles is one that is hotly contested, but to those who have learned about their own learning styles and implemented recommendations based on learning style inventories and had success, there is no doubt that this understanding of one’s own learning style is invaluable.